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ABSTRACT

This study researched the relationship between patterns of language learning strategy used by speakers of other languages and language proficiency. Participants were 348 students of English aged 14-64 years from 21 countries enrolled in a private language school in Auckland, New Zealand. Proficiency levels varied from elementary to advanced. Students completed the Oxford Placement Test and an oral interview to assess their ability to communicate effectively and fluently and to understand and answer questions with appropriate vocabulary and accurate grammar. Some students completed a written task. After placement, students completed regular tests in subsequent weeks based on work covered in class, then were promoted as appropriate. The instrument used to measure frequency of language learning strategy was the self-scoring Strategy Inventory for Language Learning for speakers of other languages. Data were collected as part of the regular classroom routine. Results highlighted a statistically significant relationship between frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency. The average frequency of strategy use across all students was 3.2. Twelve strategies were used frequently across all students, and advanced students used another 15 frequently. European students were more proficient than other students and reported using language learning strategies more frequently. (Contains 17 references.) (SM)

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Using reading as a strategy for teaching and learning language

Carol Griffiths

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Using reading as a strategy for teaching and learning language

Carol Griffiths

The observation that language as it has developed in humans is one of the major characteristics which separates us from other animals is not new. Among the functions of language, Crystal (1997) includes emotional expression, social interaction, control of reality and the expression of identity. Important as all of these functions may be, literacy moves beyond them and enables language to be recorded. For this reason, literacy becomes essential as an instrument of education. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the levels of education which we in the developed world take for granted could possibly be achieved without literacy, the importance of which has been emphasised by leading educators such as Clay (1994).

In the first language it is usual for literacy to develop after the development of oral/aural skills: a child first learns to speak and understand a few words and then some time later learns to recognise and produce these words graphically. Once literacy skills have developed, however, it is not uncommon for knowledge derived from reading to be transferred to other areas of language skill: new vocabulary, for instance, first encountered while reading may well be later used when writing, listening or speaking, thereby creating a spiral pattern of development where increased knowledge in one skill area helps to further develop expertise in another skill area. Because of this spiral relationship, reading would seem to have the potential to be an extremely valuable learning strategy for students learning other languages by providing practice for language already learnt and by exposing learners to new language which can be transferred to other skills.

This paper will report on a study conducted in a private language school in Auckland New Zealand which researched the relationship between patterns of language learning strategy use by speakers of other languages and language proficiency. The findings regarding the use of reading as a language learning strategy to enable students to learn language more effectively will be foregrounded for this report.
The participants in the study were 348 international students of English aged between 14 and 64. There were both male and female students from 21 different nationalities. Students varied in proficiency over seven levels from elementary to advanced.

Defining and determining proficiency in language learning for speakers of other languages is no easy endeavour, and has been discussed at length by experts in the field (e.g. Bachman, 1990; Bachman and Palmer, 1996: Farhady, 1982). In the private language school where this study took place, students were given the Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 1995) and the score out of 200 used to guide initial placement. In addition, students were given an oral interview in the course of which the ability to communicate effectively and fluently and to understand and answer questions with appropriate vocabulary and grammatical accuracy was noted. The results of this assessment might influence the placement decision suggested by the Oxford Placement Test. If questions

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remained regarding appropriate placement, a written task might be added. After placement, students were given regular tests in subsequent weeks based on the work covered in class, according to which they might be promoted. The level at which a student was working at any particular time, therefore, depended on a combination of the Oxford Placement score, the oral interview assessment, possibly an assessment of written competence, and the results of testing following placement.

The basic instrument for measuring frequency of language learning strategy use in the current study was the 50-item version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) for speakers of other languages (Oxford, 1990). The SILL is a self-scoring, paper-and-pencil survey which consists of a series of statements such as "I review English lessons often" to which students are asked to respond on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always).

Data were collected as part of a normal classroom routine aimed at getting students to think about ways to learn more effectively. Data were analysed for average frequencies of use, for significant relationships (Pearson) and a univariate regression analysis was carried out in order to determine the amount of variance in proficiency accounted for by strategies used highly frequently by more proficient students.

As reported by Griffiths and Parr (2001), the results indicated that there was a statistically significant relationship between frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency (r=.29, p=.01, n=348). The average frequencies of use for elementary students, for advanced students and across all students are set out in *Table 1*. The strategies used highly frequently across all students are highlighted in the "AS" column and the strategies used highly frequently by advanced students in addition to those used highly frequently across all students are highlighted in the "A" column.

As can be seen in *Table 1*, the average reported frequency of strategy use across all students was 3.2. For advanced students the average was 3.4, while for elementary students it was only 3.1.

A dozen strategies are used across all students highly frequently (defined by Oxford, 1990, as average=3.5 or above). In addition to this core of 12 frequently used strategies, advanced students use another 15 strategies highly frequently.

Table 1: Average reported frequency of language learning strategy use for elementary level (E), advanced level (A) and all students (AS) with number of strategies reportedly used highly frequently

Item	Statement (paraphrased for brevity)	E	A	AS
1	I think of relationships	3.3	3.6	3.4
2	I use new words in a sentence	3.1	3.4	3.1
3	I create images of new words	3.3	3.0	3.2
4	I make mental pictures	3.1	3.4	3.0
5	I use rhymes to remember new words	2.2	2.4	2.4
6	I use flashcards to remember new words	2.6	1.8	2.3
7	I physically act out new words	3.0	2.1	2.6
8	I review English lessons often	3.3	2.5	3.2
9	I use location to remember new words	3.2	2.9	3.1
10	I say or write new words several times	3.4	3.6	3.4
11	I try to talk like native speakers	3.4	4.0	3.6
12	I practise the sounds of English	3.4	3.9	3.5
13	I use words I know in different ways	3.0	3.2	2.8
14	I start conversations in English	3.4	4.0	3.4
15	I watch TV or movies in English	3.2	4.1	3.5
16	I read for pleasure in English	2.5	3.4	2.9
17	I write notes, messages, letters, reports	2.5	2.7	2.8
18	I skim read then read carefully	2.9	3.5	3.1
19	I look for similar words in my own language	3.2	3.6	3.3
20	I try to find patterns in English	3.1	3.5	3.2
21	I divide words into parts I understand	2.8	3.7	3.1
22	I try not to translate word for word	2.3	3.5	2.7
23	I make summaries	2.5	2.9	2.8
24	I guess the meaning of unfamiliar words	3.0	3.9	3.4
25	When I can't think of a word I use gestures	3.6	3.9	3.7
26	I make up words if I don't know the right ones	3.1	2.9	3.1
27	I read without looking up every new word	2.5	4.1	2.8
28	I guess what the other person will say next	3.1	3.3	3.1
29	If I can't think of a word I use a synonym	3.1	4.6	3.7
30	I try to find many ways to use English	3.4	3.7	3.5
31	I use my mistakes to help me do better	3.1	4.0	3.5
32	I pay attention to someone speaking English	3.5	4.5	3.9
33	I try to find how to be a better learner	3.2	3.6	3.6
34	I plan my schedule to have time to study	3.0	2.7	3.0
35	I look for people I can talk to in English	3.3	3.4	3.3
36	I look for opportunities to read in English	3.0	3.3	3.2
37	I have clear goals for improving my English	3.1	3.4	3.1
38	I think about my progress in learning English	3.3	3.8	3.5
39	I try to relax when afraid of using English	3.3	4.0	3.3
40	I encourage myself to speak even when afraid	3.3	3.8	3.4
41	I give myself a reward for doing well	2.7	2.8	2.9
42	I notice if I am tense or nervous	2.9	3.0	3.1
43	I write my feelings in a diary	2.6	1.7	2.3
44	I talk to someone else about how I feel	3.0	2.5	2.9
45	I ask others to speak slowly or repeat	3.7	4.3	3.9
46	I ask for correction when I talk	3.0	3.5	3.2
47	I practise English with other students	3.1	3.4	3.2
48	I ask for help from English speakers	3.4	3.6	3.3
49	I ask questions in English	3.3	4.1	3.6
50	I try to learn the culture of English speakers	3.0	3.7	3.3
Overall average reported frequency of use		3.1	3.4	3.2
Number of strategies reportedly used highly frequently		3	27	12

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The data were further examined for differences in frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency according to the learner variables of nationality, gender and age. No statistically significant differences were found according to gender or age, but, as Griffiths and Parr (2000) report, statistically significant differences were found between European students and the other national groups. European students were more proficient on average (average level=5.2) than other students (average level=3.7) (t=5.422, df=346, p<.05). Europeans also reported using language learning strategies more frequently (average=3.5) than other students (average=3.2) (t=4.994, df=346, p<.05).

The Europeans reported highly frequent use of four language learning strategies (Items 16, 35, 36, 47) which were in addition to those used highly frequently by advanced students but not by all students. If these four strategies are added to the previous list of 15 strategies used by advanced students, a list of 19 strategies emerges which are used highly frequently by the most proficient groups of students (advanced and Europeans), as set out in *Table 2*

Table 2: Strategies used highly frequently by the most proficient groups of students in addition to strategies used highly frequently by other students

Item	Statement (paraphrased for brevity)
1	I think of relationships
10	I say or write new words several times
14	I start conversations in English
16	I read for pleasure in English
18	I skim read then read carefully
19	I look for similar words in my own language
20	I try to find patterns in English
21	I divide words into parts I understand
22	I try not to translate word for word
24	I guess the meaning of unfamiliar words
27	I read without looking up every new word
35	I look for people I can talk to in English
36	I look for opportunities to read in English
39	I try to relax when afraid of using English
40	I encourage myself to speak even when afraid
46	I ask for correction when I talk
47	I practise English with other students
48	I ask for help from English speakers
50	I try to learn the culture of English speakers

These 19 "plus" strategies (used highly frequently by the most proficient groups of students in addition to those used highly frequently by others) were found to account for 10.5% (R=.33) of the variance in proficiency. Although some psychometricians might not consider this contribution to the variance noteworthy, ten percent can make a useful difference to a student's score. Considering the large number of potential factors (including nationality, motivation, gender, age, intelligence, aptitude, attitude, personality, learning style, beliefs and so on) which might possibly affect proficiency, a group of language learning strategies such as this which accounts for more than ten percent of the variance in proficiency is of interest .

Since a list of discrete strategy items such as the one in *Table 2* is not easy to use in a classroom as a means of helping students to use language learning strategies more effectively, for pedagogical purposes, some way of dividing such an unwieldy list according to strategy type makes it more manageable as a teaching tool. It is noticeable that strategies relating to interaction with others feature strongly among the "plus" strategies:

Item 14 – I start conversations in English
Item 35 – I look for people I can talk to in English
Item 46 – I ask for correction when I talk
Item 47 – I practise English with other students
Item 48 – I ask for help from English speakers
Item 50 – I try to learn the culture of English speakers

The inclusion of six interactive strategies among those used highly frequently by more proficient students would seem to support the idea that interacting in the target language and with the target culture is important for the development of proficiency, a concept promoted by the Communicative Language Teaching Movement in recent years.
Also well represented are strategies relating to vocabulary:

Item 10 – I say or write new words several times
Item 19 – I look for similar words in my own language
Item 21 – I divide words into parts I understand

For some years, emphasis on vocabulary has been somewhat unfashionable (Nation, 1990). The inclusion in this group of strategies used highly frequent'y by more proficient students of three vocabulary-related strategies would seem to support the idea that working on vocabulary is important for the development of proficiency.

Three strategies relating to the ability to tolerate ambiguity supports the inclusion of this type of strategy among the characteristics of the "good" language learner by Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco (1978). These are:

Item 22 – I try not to translate word for word
Item 24 – I guess the meaning of unfamiliar words
Item 27 – I read without looking up every word

It is possible that the strategies in this sub-group are used by more proficient students as a means of managing continuity of learning in the face of imperfect knowledge.
Also included by Naiman *et al* (1978) among the characteristics of the "good" language learner is the ability to come to terms with the systems of language (commonly known as "grammar"). SILL strategies on the "plus" list relating to language systems are:

Item 1 – I think of relationships
Item 20 – I try to find patterns in English

Like vocabulary, the importance of language systems, or grammar, has been somewhat downplayed in recent years (Gass, 1991) but more recently there has been a rediscovery of the importance of grammar for those who speak other languages (Tonkyn, 1994). The inclusion of these strategies among those used highly frequently by more proficient students would seem to indicate the importance of developing strategies to recognise relationships and patterns in what is learned and how this new knowledge fits into the overall language system.

The importance of managing feelings when learning language has been recognised for some time, for instance by Krashen (e.g. Krashen, 1981) who stressed the importance of what he calls the "Affective Filter", which he believes, under unfavourable conditions, can block language acquisition. According to the results of the current study, the development of proficiency would seem to be related to the use of strategies to control emotions, especially of fear, and to remain relaxed and positive:

Item 39 – I try to relax when afraid of using English
Item 40 – I encourage myself to speak even when afraid

Strategies relating to the management of learning were identified as typical of higher level learners by O'Malley *et al* (1985). Two such strategies, which appear to indicate an ability by students to actively seek ways to promote their own learning, seem to be represented in this "plus" list used by the most successful groups of students in this study:

Item 35 – I look for people I can talk to in English
Item 36 – I look for opportunities to read in English

Strategies relating to the use of resources are also included among the strategies used highly frequently by more proficient groups of students:

Item 16 – I read for pleasure in English
Item 36 – I look for opportunities to read in English

In the case of both of these strategies, the "resource" is books. Other SILL items which refer to resources (such as TV and movies) are used highly frequently by all students and are therefore not included among the "plus" strategies

Strategies relating to reading also appear to form a strategy type among those on the "plus" list:

Item 16 – I read for pleasure in English
Item 18 – I skim read then read carefully
Item 36 – I look for opportunities to read in English

This adds support to the possibility that reading in the target language is a useful strategy for the development of proficiency. Getting students who are speakers of other languages to read in English is not always easy. For many years the importance of reading when learning a language was unquestioned, but in recent years the perceived usefulness of reading in the target language has diminished (Bowler and Parminter, 1992). Reading in the target language, however, can be motivating, it can provide access to culture and it can expand students' language awareness (Lazar, 1993). The inclusion of reading-related strategies among those used highly frequently by the most successful groups of students would seem to add support to the belief that reading is important when learning a new language.

An examination of the "plus" strategies, typical of more proficient students suggests the possibility that they may be able to be grouped into strategy types according to common themes, thereby making them more "digestible" for teaching/learning purposes. Since the use of these types of strategies has been shown to be typical of the more proficient students, it is possible that awareness of these results might encourage other students to build this pattern into their own strategy repertoires, thereby possibly increasing their own effectiveness as learners. Although a lot of work remains to be done on the conceptual or statistical sub-division of strategies, an examination of the results of this study suggests that a tentative grouping might be:

strategies relating to interaction with others
Items 14, 35, 46, 47, 48, 50
strategies relating to vocabulary
Items 10, 19, 21
strategies relating to the tolerance of ambiguity
Items 22, 24, 27
strategies relating to language systems
Items 1, 20
strategies relating to the management of feelings
Items 39, 40
strategies relating to the management of learning
Items 35, 36
strategies relating to the utilisation of resources
Items16, 36
strategies relating to reading
Items 16, 18, 36

This study seems to indicate that all of these types of strategies are used highly frequently by the most successful groups of learners. It should be noted that some strategies (Items 16, 35 and 36) seem to belong to more than one type, highlighting another difficulty with grouping strategies (discussed by O'Malley *et al,* 1985): that of lack of mutual exclusivity which means that strategies can frequently be considered as belonging to more than one group, thereby further complicating the establishment of sub-groups.

Without wanting in any way to suggest it is more important than the other types of "plus" strategies, it is the use of reading as a language learning strategy which is the focus of this report. These results seem to suggest that, used in conjunction with other types of strategies, reading can be a useful addition to the learning tools which students are able to use to facilitate the learning of language

Possible ways of promoting use of reading as a language learning strategy among students might include encouraging students to make use of self-access libraries and/or setting up special interest classes focussed on reading. Students might be encouraged to use the public libraries in their areas, to buy and read newspapers and magazines, to read brochures and even such "ordinary" sources of language input as the labels and instructions on packets which often contain vocabulary directly relevant to the students' needs.

My own experience is that once students have got over the initial reluctance that there often is to read in English, and once they have been guided to suitable materials (such as graded readers) which they can read with reasonable ease at their level, they often become quite "hooked" on reading. From this point they will often continue enthusiastically under their own initiative, thereby increasing their exposure to the target language and learning vocabulary and constructions which they can then use to expand their skill in other language areas.

A certain amount of effort by teachers or self-access staff often has to go in to getting them to this point, however, possibly setting aside class time to visit the self-access centre or to discuss and promote reading material in class. Since promoting the use of reading as a strategy for learning language in this way may well involve a re-examination of priorities by teachers, teacher education becomes critical to change in this area.

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